

AS I SEE IT

Assessing our trash future in Benton County

If you're not up on what's been happening with our county trash management lately, that's understandable.

It's kinda licky, for one thing, and for another, you're not alone. Benton County itself is still operating with a trash management plan from circa 1977.

But I urge you to take a moment now to catch up because it turns out this is pretty important for the health of the county. And our commissioners will be mulling over what to do in their meeting on Tuesday, July 19, and looking for public input.

In March, the county commissioned a third-party assessment of its trash situation, and that assessment dropped July 12. The assessment focuses first on the lack of "common understandings" ("facts") that



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surround our trash management, and in particular, the Coffin Butte Landfill just north of Corvallis. Let me call out a few understandings we should look for in particular:

How did the county lose control? I expect Benton County residents regard Coffin Butte (if they think of it at all) as "our landfill" — which it once was. Reviewing landfill history, however, will show that's certainly not the case today.

It appears the landfill's now taking in about a million tons of trash a year, and only 66,000 tons (6.6%) of that comes from Benton County, according to the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. (I think Linn County's number is similar.) Benton County pays 100% of the landfill's environmental cost, however, and takes 100% of its risks.

What happened to operating rules? Unbridled trash intake is only one aspect of loss of county control over the landfill. The assessment calls for an accounting of prior "conditions for use" — obligations that the county's imposed on the landfill that came to nothing.

It seems there are rules in place governing hours of

operation, visual screening, litter and so on that are on the books but which a quick trip to the dump will establish are not being heeded.

Chief among these, maybe: landfill leachate. I learned only recently that water that enters the landfill (either in trash or as rainfall on the dump) needs to be pumped out daily lest it threaten groundwater — and it's toxic with per- and polyfluoroalkyl ("forever") chemicals and many other pollutants.

Earlier, apparently, the landfill agreed to treat all leachate on site, but now it doesn't, and so millions of gallons of toxic leachate have to be trucked to the Corvallis treatment plant and passed into the Willamette River.

Greenhouse gases: how much? Perhaps the biggest "understanding" we lack is: How much methane is leaking from the landfill? Strangely, although methane is a highly destructive greenhouse gas and therefore the focus of federal, state and county action against the climate crisis, it seems to fall through the cracks at Coffin Butte. The assessment recommends that Benton County address this by clarifying which government body has jurisdiction over shared responsibilities such as methane.

Which is important, because, by my math, Coffin Butte's methane already inflicts climate damage equal to a small coal-fired power plant — and these emissions go up with each new ton of garbage.

Once the county documents these understandings, the assessment urges the county to form a work group to advise the commissioners on a new trash management plan. This is where you, dear reader, enter the picture.

That work group is mostly community members, and it operates with public review and input. With your help, we can begin to reestablish control over our trash habit and insist on planning our future with all the facts in place.

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